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AUTHOR Mead, Nancy A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of relevant oral communication theory, research, and practice from a variety of sources, such as the fields of linguistics, psychology, speech communication, and education. It describes the nature of oral communication skills, including the similarities and differences between oral and written communication. It summarizes some of the research on the development of oral communication skills and the effectiveness of instruction and training on development. Finally, it examines current educational practices and training in oral communication skills, indicates profitable directions for programs, and discusses available resources for developing oral communication programs. (RL)

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Developing Oral Communication Skills: Implications of Theory and Research for Instruction and Training *

Nancy A. Mead

Education Commission of the States
Denver, Colorado.

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What could be more basic than speaking and listening. People use these skills every day in every part of their lives. One historic study (Rankin, 1926) indicated that individuals spend 70% of the day in communication. Of this time 45% is spent listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. Present day experience confirms the predominance of oral communication.

Even with the prevalence of oral communication, one sees few conscious attempts at developing oral communication skills of individuals. This is perhaps understandable. Children entering school can speak and listen, and they learned these skills all by themselves. Futhermore, as children grow up, their oral communication skills mature without much assistance.

Nevertheless, at all ages, children through adults, one can see a wide variation in speaking and listening proficiency. Some individuals can sell anything to anyone and others cannot maintain a simple conversation. It is clear that oral communication skills have an important impact on an individual's personal and professional life. It is the gap between the highly skilled and the minimally skilled that has led to a growing interest in developing communication skills.

Unfortunately, the recent interest in speaking and listening has to some extent caught educators and researchers unprepared.

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There are a number of theories and research studies related to oral communication from various fields -- linguistics, psychology, speech communication and education. However, it is necessary to piece together evidence which is relevant. Likewise, there are diverse resources for instruction and training. However, they are catalogued under various different labels such as language arts, English, drama, management or personal improvement.

This paper attempts to reduce some of the information gap by providing an overview of relevant oral communication theory, research and practice from a variety of sources. It describes the nature of oral communication skills, including the similarities and difference between oral and written communication. It summarizes some of the research on the development of oral communication skills and the effectiveness of instruction and training on development. Finally, it examines current educational practices and training in oral communication skills and indicates profitable directions for programs.

The Nature of Oral Communication Skills

An obvious starting point for the paper is a definition of communication skills. Over the years, scholars have evolved a theory of competence in oral communication skills. Initially, theorists developed the concept of linguistic competence which focuses on understanding the underlying structural rules of language. These include knowledge of phonetics, grammar and vocabulary and collectively are referred to as language code. This theory concentrates on knowledge, not performance. However, the concept of linguistic competence seemed too limited for scholars who were concerned with the abilities individuals display in everyday interaction. This led Hymes (1971) to develop the concept of communication competence, which focuses on understanding both the rules of language code and the rules of language usage. Language usage encompasses appropriate uses of language within particular cultures and situations. Thus, communication competence is concerned more with performance than knowledge.

Another important aspect of oral communication is the features it shares and does not share with written communication. The similarities among speaking, listening, writing and reading are obvious. They all have their roots in language. Speaking and listening are based on a phonetic symbol system; writing and reading are based on a graphic

symbol system. Speaking and writing are productive skills and have as a common goal transmitting meaning. Listening and reading are receptive skills and have as a common goal comprehending meaning. Oral and written communication skills are sometimes referred to as oracy and literacy.

Stitch and others (1974) have developed a model of communication skills development which describes the progressive acquisition of oracy and literacy. They first identify basic capacities of hearing, seeing and motor movements. These develop into the skills of listening, looking, uttering and marking. Comprehending meaningful speech and producing meaningful utterances come next. These skills are referred to as auding and speaking. Lastly, reading and writing skills develop.

Although written and oral communication can both be traced to a common basis in language, there are important differences between these two modes of communication. These differences are derived from the unique qualities of oral and written language as it actually occurs.

Spoken language tends to be nonlinear, incomplete and redundant. Topics shift from subject to subject. Ideas are introduced but not completed. Information is repeated in several forms. Oral communication is ephemeral. It is rarely recorded for later referral. Finally, spoken language is accompanied by various forms of paralanguage, such as facial expression, gestures, other body movement, rate of speech, pitch and intonation. All these features add to the meaning of an oral message.

Written communication is usually linear, complete and succinct. Ideas are presented sequentially in full sentences, with concentrated meaning. Written communication is fixed in print and is available for later referral. All of the meaning is conveyed through printed symbols. No additional mechanisms expand the meaning of the written message.

In addition to, and perhaps because of, the differences in oral and written communication, these two modes are used for different communication purposes, and with different effects. For example, one common purpose of oral communication is informal and personal communication. In many everyday situations, there is a great degree of shared meaning between communicators which allows for abbreviated forms of speaking. Oral communication, because it is augmented by paralanguage communication, is particularly

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powerful for communicating affect. Body movement and vocal expression can be used to heighten the impact of the verbal message. A third purpose of oral communication is teaching and conflict resolution. Face to face interaction and feedback allow for clarification of meanings, modification of behaviors and possible compromise.

Written communication is a particularly powerful mode of communication for other communication purposes. Because written communication tends to be complete and is fixed in print, it is useful for communicating difficult, complex concepts. The reader may go back and reread sections so that meanings and relationships are understood. It is also useful in situations where there is smaller amounts of shared meanings, since the meaning of the message is communicated entirely in the written symbols.

The qualities of oral and written communication, both their similarities and differences, provide an important basis for considering the design of speaking and listening programs.

Development of Oral Communication Skills

The development of oral communication skills is a lifelong process. Basic listening and speaking competencies are acquired early in life. However, developing communication competence, knowledge of both code and usage, continues throughout life. Among adults one finds many levels of competence and for an individual competence may vary from situation to situation.

Human beings are born with the biological capacity to acquire language (Lenneberg, 1967). Competencies develop naturally as the child interacts with spoken language. Initially, these competencies reflect the culture and home environment with which the child is surrounded. Most children entering school have mastered the basic skills of language code, even though a child might display some immature forms of pronunciation or grammar or might use a code other than the standard of the classroom. (See Cazden, 1972, for a review of language development in children.)

Interestingly, the research also indicates that the child also begins to learn the rules of language usage early in life. Very young children demonstrate skills in using oral communication to inform, to persuade and to interact with others. For example Phillips, Butt and Metzer (1974) observed preschoolers using a variety of strategies to

engage adults in conversation and Rodnick and Wood (1973) found three and four year olds employing a variety of verbal and nonverbal strategies to persuade peers and adults. (See Allen & Brown, 1976, for a review of the literature in developing communication competencies, particularly in language usage.)

The skills in language usage continue to develop through the school years. A particularly important phase is the development of role-taking skills, which reaches maturity in the early teens (Dickson & Moskoff, 1980). These skills are the basis for many communication purposes, especially informing and interacting. They also play an important part in general cognitive development.

Adolescents and adults develop skills in language usage differentially for various functions and situations. Many achieve high levels of competence, while some still cannot demonstrate many basic skills such as giving direction or engaging in social interaction. A recent study of twelfth graders in Massachusetts indicates that 18% of the students in a hypothetical emergency failed to give the basic information of what the problem was and where help was needed (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1980).

Effectiveness of Instruction and Training

The research related to improving oral communication skills through instruction and training is more limited than the descriptive research on skills development. Brown (Allen & Brown, 1976) reviewed seventeen studies of unstructured, moderately structured and highly structured programs for improving communication skills. Levels of programs ranged from preschool through junior high. For example, one study (Neidermeyer & Oliver, 1972) assessed the effectiveness of a program which included public speaking and dramatic skills for kindergarten and first grade children. It found that the experimental group out performed the control group in all areas except extemporaneous speaking, which was not covered heavily in the instruction. In general, Brown found that instruction of a variety of types did make a difference. Students tended to learn specific skills which were the focus of instruction. They had some trouble transferring skills to other situations but did show continued development of communication skills. It should be noted that many studies Brown reviewed were conducted in laboratory settings and dealt with very specific communication tasks. Dickson and Patterson (1979) point out that there is very little

evidence of the effectiveness of oral communication curricula implemented in schools. Therefore, the methods question as it applies to more common educational settings is still unanswered.

Current Educational Practices in Oral Communication

The research suggests that oral communication plays an important role in education, especially at the elementary level. When children enter school they are placed in an environment which uses oral communication as a major tool for instruction and demands that children demonstrate their learning through oral communication, i.e., children must talk about what they learn. Secondly, oral interaction in the classroom with peers and adults is an important element in the general cognitive development of children. Thirdly, oral communication provides an important stepping stone for developing skills in reading and writing. Finally, school provides an important place where children may broaden their skills in language usage.

Despite the important role speaking and listening plays in education, oral communication might be considered a submerged curriculum, one that is not actively attended to or fully utilized.

In the early elementary years, many language arts programs revolve around speaking and listening activities. These activities are primarily directed toward developing reading readiness and include such things as developing pronunciation and fluency in speaking and developing discrimination and comprehension skills in listening. However, little attention is given to developing oral communication skills, particularly in language usage, for their own sake.

As the child moves into middle school, reading and writing become the primary focus of the language arts curriculum. Very little formal teaching is focused on oral communication skills.

At the secondary education level, oral communication reemerges as the focus of formal instruction, including areas such as public speaking, debate and drama. These subjects are usually a part of the elective curriculum and usually only a small minority of students are exposed to these courses. Only rarely are more informal and functional oral communication skills taught.

Few adults are exposed to training in oral communication skills. Some organizations support short-term programs (workshops or seminars) for supervisory and management personnel. Some programs in personal development include oral communication skills and these are available through adult education programs.

It should be noted that besides the speaking and listening activities in structured curricula, a great deal of instruction and training is conducted through the mode of oral communication. Students spend much of their school day listening to their teachers. Speaking occurs regularly in the form of story telling, class discussion, group work, and oral reports. Thus, the typical school program provides opportunities for students to practice oral communication skills. However, Brown and others (1980) note that many teachers are unaware of their own impact on oral skills development. Without conscious awareness it is unlikely that these oral communication experiences will be used to their fullest for instruction and training.

Suggestions for Programs

The theory, research and experience suggest some changes in the design of oral communication programs -- the emergence of speaking and listening skills as a part of the total educational program. The data suggest in some cases the need to integrate speaking and listening skills with writing and reading skills and in other cases the need to focus directly on speaking and listening as an area for skills development. The findings call for an emphasis on all phases of the learning process -- teaching, practice and feedback -- and support the need to consider the unique qualities of oral communication and the formal and informal purposes it fulfills.

Suggestion 1: Establish focused programs for speaking and listening skills development

Skill development requires teaching, practice and feedback. Although typical educational programs provide considerable practice in speaking and listening skills, they provide less teaching and feedback. The solution to part of this problem is establishing speaking and listening as the focus of specific instruction or training. This provides the opportunity for students to concentrate on these skills and to obtain feedback on their performance. This suggestion is particularly important at the middle school level, where speaking and listening skills are seldom taught

directly. Also, programs should focus on language usage, not just aspects of language code. It is through educational programs that individuals have a chance to expand their repertoire of oral communication skills for situations beyond their immediate home environment.

Suggestion 2: Reinforce language and cognitive development with practice in speaking and listening

As indicated earlier, oral communication plays an important role in language and cognitive development. This is fairly well recognized in early elementary instruction. However, less attention is given to the role of speaking and listening in the development of more complex language and cognitive skills. For example, developing skills in inference and synthesis, which is the focus of middle and secondary school programs, is accomplished almost entirely through reading and writing activities. This development can be enriched and reinforced by including the oral communication as well. For example, instruction in listening to propaganda and organizing a formal speech provides a natural complement to instruction in reading and writing which deal with similar skills.

Suggestion 3: Focus on a full range of oral communication situations and purposes

Schools provide considerable opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills. However, most of this practice is tied to communication in written form and relates to formal communication purposes. This practice does not take into account the unique characteristics of oral communication and the multiple purposes that it serves. Most speaking and listening activities concentrate on formal communication tasks, e.g., listening to lectures and giving speeches. The model for much of this activity is written communication. Very little communication activity focuses on oral communication as it naturally occurs, in the media, in social situations, and in everyday life activities. Students are given very few opportunities to listen and practice the type of oral communication which is most typical in their lives. Speaking and listening instruction should include teaching and practice in informal as well as formal communication tasks. Students should be given a chance to develop skills in personal, social and expressive communication. These are the purposes to which oral communication is particularly adapted.

Available Resources

One of the major problems in implementing oral communication programs is finding resources for their design, implementation and assessment. Appropriate materials do exist but they are catalogued under a variety of subject areas and they are sometimes only found in documents that are not widely disseminated.

A good starting point for program design is the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and the Speech Communication Association's "Standards for Effective Oral Communication Programs " (1979). This document, provides general guidelines for programs at the elementary, secondary and post secondary level.

Sources for instruction and training may be found in an annotated bibliography published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (Feezel, Brown, & Valintine, 1976). A similar list has been developed by Brown and others (in press) for a project conducted for the Massachusetts Department of Education. Also in conjunction with the Massachusetts project, Brown et al. have compiled descriptions of promising practices within the state.

An important part of any educational program is assessment, for both diagnosis and evaluation of student progress. Here also it is difficult to find appropriate resources, but some have been compiled in documents by Larson, Backlund, Redmond and Barbour (1978) and by Brown, Backlund, Gurry and Jandt (1979). Also it should be noted that the Speech Communication Association has developed "Criteria for Evaluating Instruments and Procedures for Assessing Speaking and Listening" (1979).

This paper has documented the need for establishing training and instruction in oral communication skills at the elementary, secondary and adult levels and has indicated some suggestions and resources for program development. The payoffs should be clear. Listening and speaking are central to work, community and family activity. Development of oral communication skills contributes to an individual's satisfaction and effectiveness in all aspects of everyday life.

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1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 700
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